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Enlisting the ESA—Towards Better Conferences

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Stating that an open letter to an academic association is welcome and well-received might seem self-evident and almost patronising; surely any association worth its membership fees would encourage its members to contribute to an open debate about its structures and events with constructive critique and suggestions! Still, I would like to start by thanking Tomáš, Petr, and Terezie for their great initiative to put their arguments in writing, and hence instigating this conversation. Thank you very much—it takes dedication and effort to voice a clear critique such as this letter does. Several of the points the authors are making in their letter have of course already been discussed in a variety of contexts, in ESA committees, in the research networks (RNs), and certainly also by individual ESA members and conference participants; all the more reason to take them up again in this open and public forum.

I'm particularly grateful for the invitation to contribute to this conversation, as I have been involved in discussions pertaining to several of these dimensions during my time as member, board member, and then chair of the Critical Political Economy Research Network (CPERN/RN06) of the ESA. At the same time, as I am now representative of the RNs in the Executive Committee, I have also gained valuable insights into the 'other side' of some of these issues. It is particularly with this RN perspective that I would like to respond, while also drawing upon my CPERN background.

The main dimensions highlighted by the authors are exclusion and inequality, the 'ivory tower' situation, and the unsustainability of conferences. It is not my place to comment on concrete issues regarding the sustainability dimension of the conference organisation for the Prague event; the conference committee and the Local Organising Committee (LOC) will certainly be able to respond to these questions in much more detail. Just a few personal observations, as someone who has been going to ESA conferences for over a decade now. It seemed to me that, as the authors also acknowledge, for the Prague conference (just as with Torino before that) considerable effort had been made to ensure that at least parts of the catering would be sourced locally and responsibly, and that the conference materials would comply with sustainability standards. But there is of course always room for improvement. In the bigger picture, as the authors themselves

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write, these might indeed be minor issues after all. But then again they are not, when we think about the impact large-scale international conferences have, with people travelling to Prague from all parts of Europe and beyond, many by plane. The fundamental dilemma of how to reconcile the effects of our mode of transportation and consumption at academic conferences with our awareness of environmental impact and our own subjectivities as progressive social actors (one would assume) would certainly make for interesting research into the sociology of sociology conferences. In any case, it is an issue that should be raised again and again, but can only be resolved (if at all) by each individual conference participant themselves.

Rather, it is with the authors' critique of exclusion on the basis of costs and inequality and the 'ivory tower' situation that I would like to engage in some more detail.

There is no such thing as a free conference lunch? Fees, finances, and equality

The arguments addressing the question of inequality that the authors put forward in the open letter would warrant some more differentiation. There are two issues at hand, as far as I can see: first, and most importantly, the costs of attending international conferences in general, and second, the question of equal access and equity during the conference programme. It is one thing not to be able to participate in a conference because of the costs; whether or not the social programme is affordable is of course also part of an inclusive conference, but at another level, and possibly something that needs to be discussed concretely by each LOC given that it also pertains to location and availability.

The issue of prohibitively high conference costs should be discussed much more often, and much more centrally, in all academic communities. To be fair, in the international academic associations that I am following (mainly in sociology, international studies and political science) these discussions are already taking place, and the respective governing bodies have attempted to respond with differentiated fee structures and travel bursaries for PhD students. Before looking at the financial support the ESA provides, the question of why conferences costs are so high in the first place is of course crucial. And high they are, regardless of which measure is applied. For a non-ESA member from a Band 1 country, for instance, registration within the 'regular' period (i.e. not early bird) cost 420 EUR for the Prague event. This is a substantial amount that, given additional costs for travel, accommodation, and subsistence during the conference, can easily go beyond allocated university travel budgets and, if paid privately, constitutes a major financial burden. For most conference participants, it will, however, not immediately be clear just how these costs are constituted, and indeed what they are getting out of paying them other than participating in the conference (as well as the odd conference trinket and coffee). There are of course financial reports, both

for the conference and for the ESA as such; more often than not people don't look at them, though for a variety of reasons. On top of that, many decisions, such as which catering and conference management services to use, are at the discretion of the LOC. The objective to keep conference fees as low as possible here needs to be reconciled with other concerns such as guaranteeing a professional and effective organisation, putting together a programme that is attractive enough to interest a great range of scholars, and contributing to the overall viability and continuity of the ESA as a non-profit organisation.

From the Research Network perspective, this constitutes a stark dilemma. As an RN coordinator, it is immensely frustrating to see that, at each conference, when registration opens, many people whose papers had been accepted decide to withdraw after all, as they cannot cover the fees. This defeats the purpose of organising inclusive conference sessions and also puts an additional organisational burden on RNs in that they need to manage withdrawals and no-shows. At the same time, it is the overall ESA framework, and in many cases also the financial support, which enables the RNs to do their work in the first place, that is, to bring together academic communities on their respective theme at ESA conferences as well as in the time between them. Most RNs have reacted very positively to the increase in funding that the ESA is able to provide for their mid-term conferences (a maximum of 2500 EUR for each RN); for several RNs this is the only funding they have access to. This would not be possible without the surplus that has been generated through the last conferences.

What, then, is to be done about high conference costs? For the 2017 Athens conference, the issue will certainly be discussed in the conference committee, together with the LOC, as well as in the Executive Committee as such. But I would also encourage the RNs to discuss this with their members and then bring forward their positions in the broader framework of the RN Council—first and foremost because the RNs really are the cornerstone of the ESA, and as such they should be part of the 'public ESA sphere' (in addition to the General Assembly) to discuss these fundamental questions. Also, however, since there are many scholars participating in events and discussions within the academic communities of the RNs who are *not* ESA members. Many of them might simply not find ESA conferences relevant for their work or may have other reasons not to become members. But if there are scholars engaged in ESA RNs for whom participation in the conferences is not possible because of financial reasons, then we need to make sure that we can at least engage with them in the more inclusive settings of RN events. And this includes providing them with a voice in the RN setting, both within their own community and within the framework the ESA provides for RNs. This does of course not solve the question of high conference costs, and to be honest I don't have a simple solution. For Athens, I'm convinced that the LOC and conference committee will do their best to keep the conference as affordable and accessible as possible.

Within the Executive, there is also a focus on updating the framework for

fees and financial support. As far as conference fees are concerned, the Band 1/2 fee distinction is meant to make it easier for scholars from 'poorer countries', as the authors of the Open Letter put it, to cover their conference fees. This is at best a rather blunt instrument, of course. Given the impact of austerity measures and concomitant cuts on the higher education sector across Europe, an increasing number of scholars in Band 1 countries are now facing reductions of travel funding, cuts in salaries, and precarious contracts and working conditions. This raises the complexity of responding to the increased need for financial support to attend ESA conferences; it seems unlikely to me that the ESA would be able to find a distributional mechanism for its limited resources that would help alleviate this situation in a way that could satisfy all constituencies. We are discussing the revision of the PhD travel subsidies now, further suggestions are certainly always welcome! Fortunately, most RNs already have practices in place to support PhDs, early career scholars, and/or colleagues in precarious employment to enable them to participate in their mid-term conferences and other events.

Beyond the ivory towers

The issue of 'conference tourism' is one that many ESA members will recognise. You fly into a city, spend a few days at a university, or even worse, conference centre, stay in a hotel with other conference participants, if you find the time use the opportunity for some sightseeing, and otherwise have a few drinks with colleagues in a random bar that you ended up in by chance. There are of course variations to this theme; very few of them, however, will involve contact with local communities, students, or stakeholders. More and more scholars seem to be uncomfortable with these large conference events; the fact that the RN mid-term conferences are so successful is certainly also due to their small(er), intensive format. The challenges of organising a major international conference are already formidable, of course, without trying to also embed the event in a local context. I agree with the authors of the Open Letter, though, that this is definitely an issue where more efforts can and should be made.

Taking the concrete theme of the conference seriously could indeed be a good starting point for such an engagement, in particular with regard to the Athens conference in 2017. The themes for ESA conferences are chosen to set an agenda for debates at the conferences—as conference themes go, they tend to be broad, but at the same time offer a certain trajectory and framing for the overall event. Now, an event under the theme '(Un)Making Europe: Capitalism, Solidarities, Subjectivities' simply cannot take place without acknowledging the complex and cataclysmic events unravelling in and around Greece: the austerity measures affecting the lives and livelihoods of people in Greece, the tragedy of thousands of refugees experiencing the full force of Fortress Europe at the borders, and the helplessness of and divisions between the peoples of Europe over these issues. After all, as the ESA Statutes insist, the ultimate purpose of the association is to

‘contribute to understanding and solving social problems, to improving the quality of life in Europe and beyond, and to encouraging peaceful and productive relations among peoples’. There was an outcry when this sentence was taken out of the statutes in a suggested revision a few years ago—all the more reason to make sure its spirit is kept alive and in practice, also at the conferences.

How to go about doing so concretely to a large extent depends on the LOC and the conference committee, since they are the ones in charge of the programme, as well as the location and partner organisations. But this does not mean delegating all responsibility for the local embedding to them, far from it. Once again, it seems pertinent to encourage the RNs to get more involved, too.

As the authors of the Open Letter suggest, one step towards more engagement with the local and national host environment would be a more (pro)active media strategy. This sounds like a great suggestion, although to be fair, how many articles about major social science conferences have you ever seen in your local/national newspaper? But even if news outlets are interested in our events, the next challenge is to condense the debates and ‘outcomes’ of an international conference with several thousand participants into soundbites and press clippings that can be disseminated for publication. Here the conference participants could contribute more actively, through their social media accounts, but also through any contacts they might have to local or online media. Within the RNs, there might be members with ties to media or public figures in a local context, as well as contacts among students, graduates, and colleagues in the host environment.

More importantly still, rather than just disseminating news about the conference, it indeed seems imperative to offer a platform for direct exchange and facilitate discussions between conference participants and local civil society, stakeholders, activists, and actors from public and private sectors. This would require close coordination and advance planning between the LOC and the initiators/organisers of such platforms, though, and would come with transaction costs for the overall conference programme. As an example from RN06, the network board usually invites local activists and includes a discussion event with critical scholars and civil society representatives at the mid-term conferences. When we tried to also plan an event with locals in Prague, however, it quickly became clear that it is rather difficult to organise these things remotely, even though we did in fact have local support.¹ Also, the strict schedule of the conference programme renders it difficult to squeeze in additional events; most RNs are pressed for time for their own sessions and business meetings as it is. These are organisational arguments, though, that should not outweigh the need to engage in these outreach and public engagement activities. Once again, I hope that the RNs will be at the forefront of proposing events and activities that can contribute to bringing the ESA closer to where it is taking place.

¹ Many thanks again to Tomáš Profant at the Institute of International Relations in Prague!

Text is cheap—a few concrete suggestions

To conclude, I would like to suggest a few concrete steps for consideration. I realise that they do not cover all the points raised in the Open Letter, but they will hopefully go some way in at least continuing the discussion.

- For the Executive Committee:
 - Discuss dedicating one of the semi-plenary sessions (or even a plenary) in Athens to a discussion of the relevance of sociology for, and in the context of, the multiple crises in Greece and the EU/Europe.
 - Continue the revision of financial support structures at ESA conferences to make them as extensive and inclusive as possible.
 - Initiate a process that would make the structure of the conference fees more transparent in terms of costs and what they pay for.
- For both the LOC and RNs, consider options to engage with local civil society and stakeholders in Athens, as well as at RN mid-term conferences and other events.
- For RNs:
 - Continue to support PhD/early career scholars as well as scholars in precarious employment in participating in mid-term conferences and share best practices with other RNs.
 - Discuss the issue of conference fees and the relevance of the ESA conference with RN members and share the outcome of these discussions within the RN Council.

In any case, it is very much to be hoped that the intervention of the Open Letter will initiate debates and contribute to the implementation of concrete changes that can contribute to the ESA becoming an even more dynamic and socially engaged academic association.